

THE CITY AS ART AND TEXT: Or, A Flaneuer in Melbourne

**NOTES FOR TALK AT THE MELBOURNE
ATHENAEUM LIBRARY 21 MAY 2008, 5.30 PM**

"I want to see what makes the world tick, naturally. God, I've spent so many years grinding it out, the least I can do is to try to look for something along the way. I'm amazed. If I was just to sit down, for example, and speak of just a few of the things I've seen that I'm sure people would have by-passed, that wouldn't have meant anything to people. But off-hand, the thought comes through my mind right now of a scene along a country highway where there were mountains in the distance and the sky alive with white rolling clouds, and fields of yellow flowers. All of those things touched me in some way."

— Herbert Huncke
— from Huncke and Louis, © 1998 LakiVazakas

MARCUS NISKI
PO BOX 27
YARRAVILLE VIC 3013
© December 2007

THE CITY AS ART AND TEXT

Introduction and background

Firstly, some background context and a minor disclaimer: this is still very much an evolving work and one of the kind in which writers write about in order to further explore and clarify their thoughts.

The ideas upon which this talk is based essentially stems from my earlier investigations into writers notebooks and subsequently the course I run at the CAE which involves taking my students through the streets, lanes and arcades of the central city of Melbourne in order to get them to practice their powers of observation, reflection and memory *in situ* as the basis for heightening their powers of observation as an important tool in their writing.

It stuck me in the course of these wanderings through our streets and lanes that many of us often engage with the city in a more superficial way than we are either aware of or perhaps would even like given our often hectic, sometimes even chaotic lifestyles.

Indeed, many of us are unaware of the literary history of our city and how our writers have portrayed the city in our literature.

Accordingly, I set out to explore a number of fascinating questions [or at least ones which I think are fascinating] that have absorbed me in researching both the history of our Melbourne writers and the idea of how we engage with cities, how we interpret them, and how we might further expand our powers of observation, reflection and slowing down our interaction with the world around us.

Consequently, I set out to explore a number of questions such as:

What are the city's secrets – where are they hidden?

What are the sorts of ideas, sentiments, reflections, observations and hidden histories revealed in the literature surrounding our city?

How have our writers responded to our city through their writers and the text that they have created?

What are our personal memories, observations, and reflections about the city and how can we draw upon these as a source of our own creativity?

What does our public art say about the city and how might it reflect on the character of the city and its people?

We are also about to embark on reviving the ancient Parisian tradition of The Flaneur - or the stroller - through the city's reveries.

This is a grand tradition, which we will evoke in slowing down our interaction with the city, its art and text, so that we might soak up its meaning and wonderment.

Today, rather than taking you on an actual tour, our tour will be a virtual one by way of slides rather than streets.

The City of Melbourne in Art and Literature

Melbourne is not Paris yet there is an unbelievably rich body of art and literature that documents a young, vibrant and ever evolving city.

And indeed as we journey through the streets and lanes of Melbourne we cannot fail to notice some of the grand aspect of Parisian architecture and art have been lovingly transported to this land down under deep in the heart of the southern hemisphere.

Let's begin by looking at some of the early depictions of Melbourne by its writers who captured some fascinating snapshots of the evolving city and the interaction with its emerging culture social, literary and artistic.

Melbourne as depicted in its early Literature

Some early depictions of Melbourne and it social landscape:

'Garryowen' (Edmund Finn): A Chronicler of Early Melbourne

Edmund Finn (1819-1898), — who wrote under the nom de plume 'Garry Owen' — was an important chronicler of early Melbourne history and its streetscape.

Journalist and author, Finn was born in Ireland in 1819 and arrived in Melbourne in 1841.

Initially employed as a tutor of the classics until 1845, Finn joined the staff of the *Port Phillip Herald* under George Cavenagh. He worked on the *Herald* for thirteen years, he later went on to become (from 1858) Clerk of Papers of the Legislative Council, eventually retiring from his post in 1886 due to his failing eyesight.

Finn was urged by Charles Gavan Duffy, a prominent Melbourne figure of the time, to write an 'anecdotal history' of Melbourne.

Whilst he was initially unwilling, Gavin Duffy persisted and in February 1880, after he had published some sketches signed 'Garryowen' in the

press, Finn agreed to undertake a larger work.

The Garryowen Sketches – or sketches 'by an old Colonist' – were reprinted as a book in 1880, and the Chronicles of Early Melbourne 1835 to 1852 by Garryowen, stretching to 2 volumes, appeared in 1888.

From 1841, Garryowen became, as he declares himself in the preface of the Chronicles –

“a spectator of almost everything that went on, whether the burning of a house or the founding of a Church, a Mayor-making or a prize-fight, a charity sermon or an execution, a public dinner or a ‘corroboree’.”

Finn kept voluminous notes in the compiling of his chronicles and they contain great quantities of valuable information and insights about early Melbourne and its formation.

Finn died on 4 April 1898. He was twice married and his son, Edmund, published *A Priest's Secret* (Melbourne, 1888) along with other works.

Fergus Hume (1859-1932) - The Mystery of the Hansom Cab (1886)

Perhaps one of the most fascinating early writers to portray the streets of Melbourne – particularly Collins Street, was that of Fergus Hume.

Fergus Hume, barrister and novelist, was born in England on 8 July 1859, the second son of Dr James Hume.

Educated at the Otago Boys' High School and the university of Otago, Hume was admitted to the New Zealand bar in 1885, and immediately went to Melbourne, intending to practise his profession.

He began writing plays, but found it impossible to persuade the managers of the Melbourne theatres to accept or even read them.

Finding that the novels of Gaboriau [French writer and pioneer of the detective novel] were then very popular in Melbourne, he obtained and read a set of them and determined to write a novel of a similar kind.

The result was *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab*, which had an immediate success when it was published in 1886.

Despite his ingenuity in attempting to have the MS published, Hume found that *'every one to whom I offered it refused it on the grounds the no Colonial could write anything worth reading'* [my emphasis added!].

Ever practical, he decided to publish the book himself and apparently sold 5000 copies within three weeks in October 1886. By the end of the year a total of 20,000 copies had been printed in a city whose population was at the time less than half a million. Virtually every literate adult must have read the book. (Caterson, vii)

In 1888, Hume went to England, settled in Essex, and remained there for the rest of his life, except for occasional visits to France, Italy and Switzerland. For more than 30 years a constant stream of detective novels flowed from his pen.

He continued to be anxious for success as a dramatist, and at one time Irving

was favourably considering one of his plays, but he died before it could be produced. Hume did not court publicity and little is known of his personal life.

He died at Thundersley, Essex, on 12 July 1932.

Hume never repeated the success of his first book, of which something like half a million copies were sold in his lifetime, but he had a public for his other books; as many as seven were sometimes published in one year. He was a capable writer of mystery stories, and may be looked upon as one of the precursors of the many writers of detective stories whose work has been so popular in the twentieth century.

As Simon Caterson, who introduces the most recent re-issue of *The Mystery of The Hansom Cab* published by Melbourne published Text Publishing – justifiably point out,

“The novel’s fame has endured well into this century. In 1954 the Sunday Times listed it as one of the hundred best crime novels of all time. Six years later Everyman’s

Dictionary of Literary Biography
declared that The Hansom Cab 'ranks
as the most successful detective
story of all time'." (Caterson, ix)

Extract from:

The Mystery of a Hansom Cab, 1886.

CHAPTER X.

IN THE QUEEN'S NAME. ['Doing the
Block' ...]

It was a broiling hot day – one of those cloudless days, with the blazing sun beating down on the arid streets, and casting deep, black shadows – a real Australian December day dropped by mistake of the clerk of the weather into the middle of August. The previous week having been really chilly, it was all the more welcome.

It was Saturday morning, and
fashionable Melbourne was "doing the
Block." Collins Street is to the
Southern city what Bond Street and
the Row are to London, and the
Boulevards to Paris.

It is on the Block that people show
off their new dresses, bow to their
friends, cut their enemies, and
chatter small talk. The same thing
no doubt occurred in the Appian Way,
the fashionable street of Imperial
Rome, when Catullus talked gay
nonsense to Lesbia, and Horace
received the congratulations of his

friends over his new volume of society verses. History repeats itself, and every city is bound by all the laws of civilisation to have one special street, wherein the votaries of fashion can congregate.

Collins Street is not, of course,
such a grand thoroughfare as those
above mentioned, but the people who
stroll up and down the broad
pavement are quite as charmingly
dressed, and as pleasant as any of
the peripatetics of those famous
cities. As the sun brings out bright flowers, so the seductive influence

of the hot weather had brought out all the ladies in gay dresses of innumerable colours, which made the long street look like a restless rainbow.

Carriages were bowling smoothly along, their occupants smiling and bowing as they recognised their friends on the side walk. Lawyers, their legal quibbles finished for the week, were strolling leisurely with their black bags in their hands; portly merchants, forgetting Flinders's Lane and incoming ships, walked beside their pretty

daughters; and the representatives of swelldom were stalking along in their customary apparel of curly brimmed hats, high collars, and immaculate suits. Altogether, it was a pleasant and animated scene, which would have delighted the heart of anyone who was not dyspeptic, or in love — dyspeptic people and lovers (disappointed ones, of course) being wont to survey the world in a cynical vein.

Mark Twain - impressions of
early Melbourne on Twain's
lecture tour (1895) – published
in 1897 in *Following The
Equator*)

[Mark Twain of course visited this very place, The Melbourne Athenaeum in 1895 as part of his world lecture tour]

In 1895, world famous American writer Samuel Langhorne Clemens better known as – Mark Twain – embarked on an epic world lecture tour in the wake of his financial trouble that would see him declare himself bankrupt just a year earlier.

Twain's gregarious personality, vast public popularity, quick wit and showmanship made him a world-wide sensation and allowed him the prospect of paying back his creditors even though his fiancés had by then been cleverly restructured by his friend and oil tycoon Henry Huttleston Rogers whose company Standard Oil whose predecessor companies had been founded by John D. Rockefeller. (See Wiki on Standard Oil)

Twain had made a substantial amount of money through his writing, but he spent much of it in bad investments, mostly in new inventions.

He was fascinated with science and scientific inquiry. He developed a close and lasting friendship with Nikola Tesla [pioneering researcher in the field of electricity who paved the way for modern AC current], and the two spent much time together in Tesla's laboratory.

Twain inventions [had apparently] included a bed clamp for infants, a new type of steam engine, and the kaolatype (or collotype, a machine designed to engrave printing plates).

The Paige typesetting machine was a beautifully engineered mechanical marvel that amazed viewers when it worked, but was prone to breakdowns; before it could be commercially perfected it was made obsolete by the Linotype. He patented an improvement in adjustable and detachable straps for garments.

Twain also lost money through his publishing house, which enjoyed initial success selling the memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant but went bust soon after, losing money on the idea that the general public would be interested in a Life of the Pope.

Twain's writings and lectures combined with the help of a new friend enabled him to recover financially.

In 1893, he began a 15-year-long friendship with financier Henry Huttleston Rogers, a principal of Standard Oil.

Rogers first made Twain file for bankruptcy. Then Rogers had Twain transfer the copyrights on his written works to his wife, Olivia, to prevent creditors from gaining possession of them. Finally Rogers took absolute charge of Twain's money until all the creditors were paid.

Twain then embarked on an around-the-world lecture tour to pay off his creditors in full, despite the fact that he was no longer under any legal obligation to do so.

In 1895, Twain visited the City of Melbourne as was glowingly impressed by the vibrancy and splendour of the city. Writing in his world travelogue published as *Following the Equator*, Twain's description of his visit to Melbourne may be found in Chapter XVI:

"Melbourne spreads around over an immense area of ground. It is a stately city architecturally as well as in magnitude. It has an elaborate system of cable-car service, to has museums, and colleges and schools, and public gardens, and electricity, and as a libraries and theatres, and mining centres, and wools centres, and centres of the arts and sciences, and boards of trade, and ships, and railroads, and a harbour, and social clubs and journalistic clubs, and racing clubs and a squatter club sumptuously houses and apportioned, and as many churches

and banks as can make a living. In a word it, it is equipped with everything that goes to make a thoroughly modern great city. It is the largest city in Australasia, and fills the post with honour and credit..."

Samuel Clemens [Mark Twain] in *Following the Equator*, Chapter XVI, as published in *Mark Twain in Australia and New Zealand*, Penguin Colonial Facsimiles, 1973, p161.

Sources: Wiki on Twain; *Following the Equator*, Chapter XVI, as published in *Mark Twain in Australia and New Zealand*, Penguin Colonial Facsimiles, 1973, p161.

Marcus Clarke (1846-1881)

Arguably the most important figure of early Australian literature, journalist and author Marcus Andrew Hislop Clarke was born on 24 April 1846 at 11 Leonard Place, Kensington, London, the only child of William Hislop Clarke, a Chancery lawyer, and his wife Amelia Elizabeth, née Matthews.

His father had a flourishing legal practice in London, and young Marcus's regarded his future as well assured.

However, a number of mysterious business transactions made by his father saw Marcus' young world rapidly crumble around him, his father later removed to Northumberland House in 1862 after a physical and mental, as well as financial, breakdown and died there about a year later.

As a consequence of this family breakdown, and urged by relatives who could see no immediate solution to his situation in England, Clarke emigrated to Australia, where his uncle James Langton Clarke, was a judge in the

western district of Victoria at Ararat.
(Wannan, viii-ix)

Initially employed with the help of his uncle as a bank clerk at the Bank of Australasia, Clarke's experience of visiting the "rough mining camps and outback settlements to which he was occasionally sent to collect gold" (Wannan, ix) proved to be engaging enough for the intellectually precocious Clarke at that time; also allowing him to "absorb the atmosphere, listen to the speech and idiom and observe the manner and customs " (Wannan, ix).

Devoting his spare time to reading and haunting the second hand bookshops of Melbourne, Clarke also from time to time began to "write contributions for Melbourne newspapers and farces for the local stage" (Wannan, ix).

Urged along and encouraged by a visiting British army surgeon Dr Lewins who visited Melbourne in 1866-7, Clarke began to write articles on both literary and philosophical subjects for a Melbourne literary journal, the Australasian that included pieces on "Balzac and Modern French Literature

and an essay on Gustve Dore. (Wannan, x)

During 1867, the major daily Melbourne paper The Argus as a theatre critic employed Clarke. However, his incapacity to stand regular routine work did not suit his flamboyant bohemian character and his full time employment was apparently terminated when he turned in a review a play, which unknown to him, had actually been cancelled! (Wannan, x)

Subsequently employed as a freelance contributor to the paper – terms which were much more suited to his temperament – Clarke began to contribute his observations on Melbourne and life in the colony under the rather dandified tittle of The Peripatetics Philosopher.

Dressing in dandified style and coming to the attention of an increasingly broad public, Clarke further indulged his bohemian passions in founding the Yorick club along with J. J Shillinglaw, George Gordon McCrae alongside such members including Adam Lindsay Gordon and Henry Kendall.

But Clarke's greatest project — his serialised novel *His Natural Life* — would begin in 1870 with his appointment as Editor of the *Australian Journal* that would carry the first instalment of his new novel that would later be collected together in book form.

Although had not been the success he had hoped for in serial form, the novel in book form published as *The term of His Natural Life* proved to be an outstanding success when first published by George Robertson in Melbourne in 1874, with a subsequent edition published by Bentley of London in the following year. (Wannan, xiii)

Before preparing the book for its eventual publication, Charles Gavan Duffy had also helped Clarke in revising the manuscript in suggesting some drastic changes that would see the book becoming a much finer product. (Wannan, xiii)

Always troubled by financial problems due to his flamboyant lifestyle and compounded by his inability to manage money and his sometimes fatal self-

sabotage at moments which would have restored his precarious financial position, Clarke went on to write for various journals in Melbourne and in London including producing interesting and controversial essays such as 'Civilisation Without Delusion (presciently about religion and the teaching of Darwin's theory of evolution); The Future of The Australian Race and numerous journalistic and literary pieces.

Tragically, Clarke died at the young age of 35 in virtual squalor in a cottage house in Tinkerman Street, St Kilda which "was bare of furniture; and there was scarcely enough money to buy medicines." (Wannan, XV)

Clarke's Bohemian Passions:

What is also fascinating about Clarke is his bohemian passions for exploring Melbourne's evolving metropolitan character. Indeed as Andrew Mc Cann writer in his absorbing and excellent study of Clarke:

"Clarke was a writer who at the very least liked to imagine himself belonging in the metropolitan version of the nineteenth century that Benjamin evokes Phantasmagoria, bohemia, city streets, the marketplace, the interior: the topography of Paris is repeated as fantasy in the topography of Clarke's Melbourne..."

From: Andrew Mc Cann in Marcus Clarke's Bohemia, P 18.

Some Contemporary Writers and Their Writings About Melbourne as a City

Let's look very briefly at some of the contemporary Melbourne writers who have written about the streets and lanes of Melbourne city and its social and cultural, and artistic life.

Contemporary writers:

Robyn Annear – Barebrass [imagining early Melbourne]

Melbourne writer Robyn Annear has done some very engaging work in chronicling Melbourne's early history in her books – Barebrass which imagines early Melbourne – as well as her book on Whelan the Wrecker which charts the course of a curious cultural institution in Whelan the Wrecker who were famous for their demolition of many important buildings proudly displaying their sign at each demolition site: "Whelan the Wrecker is Here"

Barebrass – the title which refers to "... Melbourne it was known in the early days... the period from the arrival of white settlers in 1835 until 1851." (Annear, xi-xii)

Rather than writing a dry factual history, Annear has used an imaginative process to document Melbourne history through narrative storytelling rather than rigorous orthodox history writing.

Arnold Zable

Café Sherazade and Melbourne's Jewish community in Acland St., St. Kilda

Radical Melbourne [Jeff + Jill Sparrow]

Local Melbourne historians and writers Jeff + Jill Sparrow have also done some very interesting writing on the inner urban history of Melbourne which looks at the streets and lanes of Melbourne focussing on the left or radical history of Melbourne

"Radical Melbourne, written in collaboration with her brother Jeff Sparrow, presents a guide through the first hundred years of political radicalism in Melbourne, focusing on the structures, streets and public places that remain today. It concentrates on identifying the physical traces of radical Melbourne, in the hope that geographical familiarity will provide a cultural and political bridge between the struggles

of the past and the people of the present.

Radical Melbourne is a secret history of Melbourne, illustrated by rarely seen images from the archives of the State Library of Victoria. It is not an academic history or an alternative tour guide for jaded walkers, though the book originated in a series of tours conducted by the Sparrows.

The authors say, "The secret history of this city seemed to us an inspiration." Controversial journalist and author John Pilger called Radical Melbourne "a brilliantly original, long overdue unveiling of a great city's true past" and in fact it has spawned both a sequel and Radical Brisbane, a similar book about the Queensland capital, by Raymond Evans and Carole Ferrier.

Radical Melbourne 2: The enemy within traverses the same alleys and lanes to uncover a story of secret police and secret armies, guerrilla artists and underground cells, militant unionists and intransigent peaceniks."

Source: Wiki on Jill Sparrow

Particularly interesting within Radical Melbourne is coverage of a Melbourne underground icon in that of the Cave Clan an organization dedicated to "going underground since 1985". {See: www.caveclan.org}

Melbourne as depicted in Public Art

What is art - how are cities enculturated by public art and architecture?

Melbourne has long been the centre for the creation of a great deal of Australia's most important art.

Many artists including - William Dargie, Rupert bunny, Sidney Nolan, Albert Tucker, John Percival, Joy Hester, Tom Roberts, Arthur Streeton, Frederick McCubbin, and Charles Conder were based in or on the outskirts of Melbourne, particularly at Heide based in Melbourne's outskirts at Heidelberg.

Melbourne also has a long tradition of public art in terms of public monuments, sculpture and installation art.

Most recently Melbourne's stencil and graffiti art has received widespread attention, not just around Australia, but also across the world.

The reinvigoration of Melbourne's laneways have played a major part of this through opening up once neglected spaces which served purely as functional service lanes rather than thorough fares which attract engagement and curiosity from city dwellers and visitors alike.

The Laneways Commissions in Melbourne, which have been part of the Melbourne street art culture since 2001, have played an important part in generating interest and attention in these spaces and helped to encourage people to explore and interact with these spaces.

Public art/ street art/ graffiti art and city spaces

The Laneway Commissions [2001-2007]

From: Laneways Commission Brochure 2007

LANEWAYS OF MELBOURNE

Robert Hoddle, the city's original surveyor, was thinking about bullocks when he laid out the plan for Melbourne's impressively wide main streets. At the time, goods were

routinely transported through the city by bullock teams and if the streets were too narrow, a team of bullocks attempting to turn a corner would result in traffic chaos. So he insisted on streets that were almost one hundred feet wide.

The considerable size of the main streets led to the creation of a labyrinth of smaller, people-sized lanes, weaving their way behind and between the imposing streets.

Today, many of the laneways are populated by smaller businesses and cafés. Others retain their original form, offering a rare glimpse into the city's history. For many, the real Melbourne is to be found in these laneways, with unique and surprising discoveries waiting around countless corners

Stencil Art Capital:

Melbourne stencil / graffiti artists

The Flaneur: or, how to read a city...

['...as Benjamin explains, the flaneur is in search of experience, not knowledge...' Edmund White, p47.]

Let us come back to the notion of the Flaneur and how we engage with cities.

Who, or what, is a Flaneur...?

The flâneur, or the notion of the flaneur, is a creation of the 19th century Parisian streets that offered an almost unlimited kaleidoscopic opportunity for social observation and experience.

The flaneur, by definition, is an 'exemplary stroller' who strolls through the streets at a pace in which observation becomes the centre point of his experience.

As Edmund White suggests in his stunningly observant account of the flaneur and the 'paradoxes of Paris', Walter Benjamin was probably one of the most acute observers of the idea of the

flaneur and one of literature's' most important writers in documenting the activities of this unique Parisian creature.

For Walter Benjamin, the flaneur ultimately, is

"..in search of experience, not knowledge..." [Edmund White, p47.]

The flaneur, by definition, is not a tourist or pedestrian eager to rapidly consume the landscape, but one who is almost overwhelming by the delectable possibilities of the urban landscape, so much so that he is not really sure where to start or where his journey will take him.

A central focus of Walter Benjamin's investigation into urban landscape and the habitat of the flaneur was that of the Passages or arcades of Paris [which as we will see are the models for those of Melbourne's own stunning arcades] the result of which was compiled in Benjamin's massive document entitled Das Passengen-Werk or in English The Arcades Project.

Begun in 1927, and originally conceived as a planned collaboration for a newspaper article on the arcades of Paris, Benjamin's obsession with the arcades burgeoned into a full scale *magnum opus* which drew together hundreds of documentary fragments [in the form of quotations, extracts, texts, notations and commentaries] organized together under themes or "Convolutés" which were drawn from a mass of notebooks which Benjamin kept in which he had gathered together the raw materials for the work.

Benjamin thus studied the arcades as fascinating living, breathing entities and as key to how city's function in terms of their broader engagement with capitalism, culture and the life of a metropolis.

So What is An Arcade and Why was Benjamin so Captivated by them?

Df of an arcade...

Definition of an Arcade from: The Passageways of Paris:

Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project and Contemporary Cultural Debate in the West by CHRISTOPHER ROLLASON

[So] What is an arcade? In its classic sense, the term denotes a pedestrian passage or gallery, open at both ends and roofed in glass and iron, typically linking two parallel streets and consisting of two facing rows of shops and other commercial establishments - restaurants, cafés, hairdressers, etc.

"Arcade" is the English name: in French the arcades are known as "passages", and in German as "Passagen". [7] The modern arcade

was invented in Paris, and, while the concept was imitated in other cities - there are particularly fine mid-nineteenth century examples in Brussels - the Parisian arcades remain the type of the phenomenon.

Benjamin quotes a passage from the Illustrated Guide to Paris, a German publication of 1852, which sums up the arcades' essence:

"These arcades, a recent invention of industrial luxury, are glass-roofed, marble-panelled corridors extending through whole blocks of buildings, whose owners have joined together for such enterprises. Lining both sides of the corridors, which get their light from above, are the most elegant shops, so that the arcade is a city, a world in miniature, in which customers will find everything they need". [8]

Other Theorists of the City and Our Interaction with Cities

Perec (observation and experiment) –
observations of a Paris square

Benjamin

Simmell (theories of capitalism and the
city)

Baudelaire (observation and poetic
response)

de Botton (space and place)

How to Read a City II: Some Observational Techniques for the Journey

Memory, Observation, Reflection:
Writing ... Slowing Down and
Observing The City as Art and Text

Next time as you wander through the streets and lanes you might like to consider the following ideas as the basis for making notes in your notebook or even as mental notes which can be used in later reflection and writing:

Poem – write a poem based on an observation you make

Found poem – construct and write down your found poem in your notebook

Observation – record an observation/s you have made

Overheard conversation– record and overheard conversation as dialogue

Visual image- record a visual image that you have seen as the basis for poem or starting point for a piece of writing

Remembrance- Record a remembrance that may have been triggered by something you have seen

Smell- use your sense of smell and record some notes or reflections

Reflection- use a visual image to reflect or to write a meditation about what you have just seen

Colour - Taking the Colour Walk:
William S. Burroughs and the
'colour walk' through Paris ...

"I was taking a colour walk
around Paris the other day ...
I was walking down the
boulevard when I suddenly
felt this cool wind on a warm
day, and when I looked out I
was seeing all the blues in
the street in front of me...

blue on a foulard...a girls'
blue sweater...blue neon...
the blue sky ...all the blues.
When I looked again, I saw
nothing but all the reds...of
traffic lights...car lights...a
café sign...a mans nose..."

Excerpt from *The Beat Hotel*, Barry Miles, Atlantic
Books, London, 2000, p 157

Other Techniques:

The Camera Eye

John Dos Passos

[U.S.A]

Blaise Cendrars

[Travel Poems; Kodak series]

The camera eye is a technique that uses acute observation as a basis for writing. The camera eye implies taking visual snapshots of scenes from life and transferring those observations into immediate textual portraits of the observed phenomenon. In its poetic form

the work of Blaise Cendrars is probably one of the best examples of poetry based on exceptional observational accuracy and attention to detail from scenes observed in life.

William S. Burroughs: A Spy in One's Own Body

American writer William S. Burroughs argues in his Naropa lectures on the craft of writing that many of the trade skills of the writer are similar to those of the spy/detective:

observation, recording, analysis, integration [of information] and reflection being crucial to the successful spy/detective.

Curiously enough, Burroughs himself may well have become a spy for the CIA had a malevolent former professor of his at Harvard had not have given him an adverse personal reference (Studs Terkel, another legendary American writer had suffered a similar identical fate when his career in the FBI was cut short when an almost identical thing happened to him as well!)

Writing exercises:

Memory, Analysis and Reflection,
narrative and our interaction
with city life –

What have we been able to learn
and put into practice – use your
jottings in as the basis for a
piece of writing now!

Conclusions:

While Melbourne is not Paris, our city offers a rich literary history that documents the growth of a colony into a sophisticated modern urban metropolis.

As may be seen in the majesty of Melbourne's own arcades, and in the writings as we have seen from Fergus Hume, the flaneur flourished in early Melbourne and is a tradition that I am keen to see revived.

Indeed the revival of the ideas of the Flaneur coincide with a notion of the need to slow down our lives and soak up the pleasures of the city at a pace with is more conducive to experience rather than activity alone.

By taking time to observe the world around us we are in a better position to enjoy the rich visual, cultural and textual landscape that surrounds us.

In invoking the rich noble tradition of the flaneur we open ourselves up to this multiplicity of experiences.

Next time you wander through the streets of Melbourne – or any metropolis for

that matter — at a leisurely pace
you might like to try some of the
exercises that I have mentioned — you
might be surprised at the outcome
either with respect to its impact on
your writing or its heightening of your
experience in general.

Marcus D. Niski
Melbourne, Australia
8 May 2008

© Copyright, All rights reserved
2008-2011